



WHAT'S THE RX FOR A HEALTHY MARRIAGE?

If you go to the search engine Ask.com and type, "What are the keys to a happy marriage?" you'll get 1,130,000 hits. But if you type, "What are the keys to a healthy marriage?" you get 11,500,000 hits, more than 10 times as many.

Does this mean there are 10 times as many ways to have a healthy marriage as there are to have a happy one? Definitely not! Whether the search engine numbers prove it or not, the fact is that happiness is only part of a healthy marriage; it's one of the rewards of a relationship that not only survives but thrives. A healthy marriage allows two people to get the most enjoyment when they're both happy, and it gives them the wherewithal to get through the difficult times when there's unhappiness for one or both of them.

If you scan the advice offered as "keys to a healthy marriage" – depending on who's giving the advice, there apparently are as few as three keys to a healthy marriage and as many as 20 or more – you'll find lots of mentions of the ability to get through tough times and unhappiness in the marriage. Helping couples with "conflict resolution" has been the basis for many marriage counseling sessions.

Yet, there is research indicating that instead of learning to avoid or resolve conflict, couples who want long and successful marriages should put more energy into maintaining affection and intimacy in their relationship. For example, the Processes of Adaptation in Intimate Relationships (PAIR) Project led by Ted L. Huston at the University of Texas at Austin began in 1981 as an inquiry into whether courtship behavior serves as a predictor of how long marriages will last. But by following couples into their marriages, the PAIR Project has drawn conclusions about why people who say "I do" go on to eventually decide they can't.

Here's an important finding, as described in an abstract on the PAIR Project research: "The key to predicting divorce was not how the partners felt about each other or how they related to each other as newlyweds, but how much their love and affection declined after two years of marriage." In other words, stop the slide in love and affection and save the marriage.

On the other hand, there's also research indicating that love and affection may not be enough to salvage a sinking relationship. A study published in 1999 by Dr. Susan Sprecher, a psychologist at Illinois State University, found that 59 percent of couples who ended their relationship reported that their love for each other was undiminished. The breakup was brought on by a drop in satisfaction from and commitment to the relationship.

What does it all mean? Perhaps that there is no single set of keys to unlock the secret of a healthy marriage. There are three things that seem to consistently show up in advice on maintaining a marriage though. They're not keys, but the three C's. They are:

- » **Commitment:** Be committed to the marriage and to each other. This is the most basic requirement for giving the relationship a chance to work.
- » **Communication:** You have to be able to communicate to know how things stand in the marriage and what's going on with each other. If there's no communication, you're flying blind.
- » **Caring:** You have to care for and about each other in the broadest sense. This means being willing to look after each others' physical and emotional needs.

Of course, there are times when couples are on different pages about what's needed to make their marriage work. And people can struggle in a marriage even if they think they're doing everything right. Sometimes it's a matter of getting the help you need. Your EAP can guide you to that help. Call or go online any time, 24/7.

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